Hasina's death sentence sets stage for volatile polls

DHAKA: A Bangladeshi court's decision to sentence exiled former prime minister Sheikh Hasina to death has done little to heal a nation scarred by her long rule and last year's bloody crackdown against student-led, anti-government protests.

Families of the victims want her immediate execution. The government demanded her extradition from India where she fled last year.

Her supporters have threatened unrest if her Awami League party, once the country's largest, remains banned from elections in February, leaving Bangladesh unable to turn the page on one of its darkest chapters.

Moments after Monday's ruling drew cheers in court, families of protest victims called for Hasina's hanging. But repeated attempts to extradite her from India have stalled, straining ties between the once close partners.

Her son, Sajeeb Wazed, has warned of massive violent protests if the ban on Awami League is not lifted — a showdown that could shake the nation of 170 million, disrupt its garment exports to global brands, and jeopardise an economy reliant on a $4.7 billion IMF bailout.

Last year's protests, which the UN says killed up to 1,400 people, had already brought economic activity to a standstill.

"True justice will come only when the hangman's rope tightens around her neck," said Abdur Rab, whose son was killed during the protests, as he held a banner bearing a noose and the words "Killer Hasina". "Only then can we wipe this dark stain from our nation's history."

Hasina, who ruled Bangladesh for 20 years including 15 straight before she fled, called the verdict politically motivated "by a rigged tribunal established and presided over by an unelected government with no democratic mandate".

Ties with India strained

The upcoming elections will mark a long-awaited return to democratic rule and are widely expected to bring the Awami League' rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, back to power. The two parties have alternated rule for generations.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's interim government, led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus and representatives of student protesters, faces the task of seeking Hasina's extradition.

After the sentence was handed down, the government told India that failure to return her would be a highly unfriendly gesture and an affront to justice.

"Under the existing extradition treaty between the two nations, this is a binding obligation for India," Bangladesh's foreign ministry said in a statement.

But all previous efforts so far to persuade New Delhi to send her back have faltered.

New Delhi said it was committed to "the best interests of the people of Bangladesh, including in peace, democracy, inclusion and stability in that country. We will always engage constructively with all stakeholders to that end".

An Indian government source said extradition is a lengthy process requiring review of tribunal documents to ensure due procedure, fair representation, and credible testimony. India cannot act without these records, and exemptions to the treaty apply if the case appears political, the source said.

"They don't have to be best of friends, but they cannot remain at loggerheads indefinitely," said economist and political analyst Jyoti Rahman.

"And as long as Hasina remains in India, it would be difficult for the Bangladesh government to normalise the relationship. (The) Indian establishment recognises that as well. Something has to be done here."

Risk of violence

Political violence surged in Dhaka ahead of the Hasina verdict, with several crude bombs exploding on Sunday and 32 blasts reported on Nov 12 alone, along with dozens of buses torched. Police have detained activists from Sheikh Hasina's Awami League over alleged sabotage.

Hasina's son and adviser Wazed said Awami League supporters would block the national election if the ban on the party was not lifted.

"There will be massive protests ... there's going to be confrontations," he said from Washington.

"My mother is in touch with all of our party leaders and activists who are in the country. I am in touch with them. We have hundreds of thousands of activists in the country. We have millions of supporters, tens of millions. They are outraged."

The interim government said the Awami League remains under legal proscription for its role in last year's violence, and India was not doing itself a favour by its "incitement to violence".

The administration's overriding goal is to protect life and property and ensure a peaceful environment ahead of elections, a spokesperson said.

Law enforcement has been instructed to act with restraint, maintain proportionality and prioritise dialogue to prevent confrontation. The priority now is stability, justice for victims, and restoring democratic governance.

For Amanullah, 24, who lost his sight during the protests, justice will only come with Hasina's hanging.

"I cannot see anymore, but the day I hear she has been hanged will be a celebration greater than Eid," he said. —Reuters

Argentine judge dismissed after causing mistrial in Maradona case

LA PLATA: An Argentine judge was relieved of her post on Tuesday after causing a mistrial in the negligence case against late football legend Diego Maradona's medical team due to her involvement in a documentary about it.

A special panel of judges, lawyers and provincial legislators dismissed Julieta Makintach, 48, from her post and disqualified her from holding any other judicial position in the future.

Makintach was one of three judges in the now-annulled trial that followed Maradona's death in 2020 while recovering from brain surgery for a blood clot after decades battling cocaine and alcohol addictions.

She recused herself after it emerged she had been interviewed for a miniseries about the case, potentially breaking a string of ethics rules.

Maradona died on Nov 25, 2020, aged 60, of heart failure and acute pulmonary edema two weeks after going under the knife. He was found dead in his bed by a day nurse.

Maradona's medical team is on trial over the conditions of his convalescence at a private home.

Prosecutors have described the football icon's care in his last days as grossly negligent.

The defendants risk prison terms between eight and 25 years if convicted of "homicide with possible intent", meaning pursuing a course of action despite knowing it could lead to death.

The case so far has focused on the decision by Maradona's doctors to allow him to recuperate at home with minimal supervision and medical equipment, instead of a medical facility.—AFP

One settler killed, three wounded in West Bank attack

GUSH JUNCTION: A car-ramming and stabbing attack left one person dead and three injured on Tuesday near Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, Israeli emergency services and the military said.

Paramedics and an army medical force "established the death of a man aged 30 with a stab wound and referred three injured people" to two Jerusalem hospitals, Magen David Adom (MDA), Israel's equivalent of the Red Cross, said in a statement.

The three injured people are a woman in her 40s in a serious condition, a man in his 30s and a boy of about 15, both in moderate condition, MDA added.

In a separate statement the Israeli army reported a "ramming and stabbing attack in the area of Gush Etzion Junction" in the south of occupied West Bank.

It also said that "soldiers are conducting searches and roadblocks, and encircling the area".

The Jewish settlement of Kiryat Arba, near Hebron, said the victim was local resident Aharon Cohen.

The Palestinian Civil Affairs Authority named the assailants as Imran al-Atrash and Walid Sabbarna, two 18-year-olds from the Hebron area, and said that Israeli forces were "holding their bodies".

The Hadassah Medical Centre in Jerusalem said the woman who had been seriously injured suffered a gunshot wound to her lower body and was undergoing surgery. The Palestinian movement Hamas hailed the attackers, saying in a statement: "The heroic car-ramming and stabbing attack that took place near the Gush Etzion settlement south of Bethlehem is a natural response to (Israel's) attempts to liquidate the Palestinian cause and the escalating aggression perpetrated by occupation soldiers and settlers in the West Bank and Jerusalem." The Palestinian Islamic Jihad group also praised the attackers.

"These heroic operations come in response to the relentless crimes of the settler gangs and the occupation army against our people," it said.

The Yesha Council, a body representing all Israeli settlements in occupied West Bank, blamed the assault on the Israeli government's refusal to annex the Palestinian territory. Violence in occupied West Bank, which Israel captured in 1967, has soared since the Hamas raid in Oct 2023.

At least 1,007 Palestinians have been killed in the territory by Israeli forces or settlers since the conflict started two years ago, according to the Palestinian health ministry.—AFP

WOMEN protest as Israeli soldiers detain a resident (right) at a refugee camp near Tulkarem, occupied West Bank, after a rally demanding the Palestinians' right to return to their homes.—AFP

US House votes almost unanimously for release of Epstein files

WASHINGTON: The Republican-controlled US House of Representatives voted almost unanimously on Tuesday to force the release of Justice Department files on the late convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, an outcome President Donald Trump had fought for months before ending his opposition.

Two days after Trump's abrupt about-face, the vote passed by 427-1, sending a resolution requiring the release of all unclassified records on Epstein to the Senate for consideration.

The public and increasingly bitter feud among Republicans over the Epstein files had fractured relations between Trump and some of his most ardent supporters.

Before the vote, about two dozen survivors of Epstein's alleged abuse joined a trio of Democratic and Republican lawmakers outside the Capitol to urge the release of the records.

The women held photographs of their younger selves, the age at which they said they first encountered Epstein, a New York financier who fraternised with some of the most powerful men in the country.

After the vote, they stood to applaud lawmakers from the House's public gallery, some of them crying and hugging each other. The Epstein scandal has been a political thorn in Trump's side for months, partly because he amplified conspiracy theories about Epstein to his own supporters. Many Trump voters believe his administration has covered up Epstein's ties to powerful figures and obscured details surrounding his death, which was ruled a suicide, in a Manhattan jail in 2019.

Trump lashes out over question

Despite his changed position on the bill, the Republican president remains angry about the attention paid to the Epstein matter. On Tuesday, he called a reporter who asked about it in the Oval Office a "terrible person" and said the television network the journalist worked for should have its licence revoked.

"I have nothing to do with Jeffrey Epstein," Trump told reporters while hosting a visit by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. "I threw him out of my club many years ago because I thought he was a sick pervert." Trump socialised and partied with Epstein in the 1990s and 2000s before what he calls a rift, but the old friendship has become a rare weak spot for the president with his supporters.

A *Reuters/Ipsos* poll found that 44 per cent of Republicans approve of Trump's handling of the matter, well below the 82pc who approve of his overall performance.

"Please stop making this political, it is not about you, President Trump," Jena-Lisa Jones, who said Epstein sexually abused her when she was 14, told a press conference before the vote.—Reuters

Microsoft tracker to manage AI in the workplace

SAN FRANCISCO: In Microsoft's view, humans are not the only ones to manage in a workplace. Artificial intelligence needs a manager, too.

The software maker on Tuesday announced Microsoft Agent 365, a program for its customers to track what it expects to be 1.3 billion agents automating office work by 2028. Agents are AI-powered programs that perform tasks on humans' behalf. Microsoft and other companies are actively marketing agent software. While some customers have successfully deployed these systems for code generation, others have struggled with implementation, fueling concerns about a market bubble.

According to Microsoft, just like IT staff can see who is on a company's network and manage what resources they can access, its latest software aims to extend similar controls to supervising AI agents. The programme lets IT personnel quarantine rogue agents while equipping authorised ones with a range of productivity tools said Microsoft.—Reuters

US cancels meetings with Lebanese army chief over remarks against Israel

BEIRUT: The US has cancelled meetings in Washington with Lebanese armed forces chief Gen Rudolf Hachem after objecting to a statement the army issued on Sunday about border tensions with Israel.

A Lebanese security official said the cancellations were "sudden and shocking" and prompted Hachem to call off the trip.

Hachem had been due to arrive in Washington on Tuesday for meetings on military assistance and border-security cooperation.

A US official said the United States cancelled the meetings with Hachem, but did not offer a reason. The US Embassy in Beirut also did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Washington is a key backer of Lebanon's army, providing support of more than $3 billion over the last two decades in a policy aimed at supporting state institutions in a country where Hezbollah has long held sway.

In Sunday's statement, the army accused Israel of "insisting on violating Lebanese sovereignty, causing instability and obstructing the army's deployment in the south".

It condemned the "latest attack" on a Unifil peacekeeping patrol and said Israeli actions required "immediate action" from friendly states as they amounted to "a dangerous escalation".

The Israeli military occupies five posts within Lebanon and frequently carries out air strikes in the country's south that it says are targeting Hezbollah.—Reuters

Eight jailed in France over migrant boat tragedy in Channel

PARIS: A French court on Tuesday sentenced eight men to between three and 15 years in prison over the deaths of seven people when a boat carrying migrants capsized in the Channel in 2023.

Two Iraqis, six Afghans, and one Sudanese national went on trial in November, accused of running a migrant-smuggling ring and faced charges including involuntary manslaughter, in the latest case targeting such networks between France and the UK.

Two 45-year-old Iraqi Kurds identified as the ringleaders of the smuggling network received the heaviest terms — 12 and 15 years — over the deaths of seven Afghans trying to reach the English coast.

The sentences were in line with prosecutors' demands of three to 15 years for the eight defendants, who are aged between 23 and 45.

The court acquitted a ninth defendant, a Sudanese man who fled war-torn Darfur and was the presumed pilot of the vessel, after the public prosecutor's office requested his release, recognising him as a "victim" in the incident.

The defendants "took advantage of the great vulnerability to profit from passages in dangerous conditions", said the presiding judge on Tuesday. "All of you who have been found guilty of manslaughter created the conditions that led to the deaths of people who drowned before help arrived and exposed others to imminent risk of death," the judge added.

The defendants had denied any involvement in the crossing.—AFP

Intensive search ordered for Nigerian girls

LAGOS: A top Nigerian general has ordered his troops to fight "day and night" to rescue 25 schoolgirls abducted in the northwest.

The early Monday morning raid on a secondary school in Kebbi state was the latest in a string of abductions of schoolchildren in northern Nigeria, more than a decade after Boko Haram's infamous kidnapping of 276 girls in the northeast sparked international uproar.

"You must continue day and night fighting. We must find these children," Maj Gen Waidi Shaibu, recently promoted to chief of army staff, told troops deployed to Kebbi state on Monday. Shaibu urged the soldiers to "leave no stone unturned" in the search for the schoolgirls.

Though police rushed to the Government Girls Comprehensive Secondary School in the town of Maga, the gang had managed to scale the fence and steal away with the students after killing the school' vice principal.

Kebbi is caught between a militant threat from neighbouring Niger and the scourge of criminal gangs who loot villages.—AFP

Amid Hamas misgivings, Trump and Israel hail UN vote on Gaza

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framework that includes establishing the Board of Peace and deploying an International Stabilization Force (ISF) to Gaza. The force is tasked with overseeing demilitarisation and supporting the transition toward an eventual independent Palestinian state.

President Trump also thanked states outside the Council that backed the initiative, naming Qatar, Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Turkiye and Jordan. He said the full membership of the Board of Peace would be announced "in the coming weeks," though he has already mentioned former British prime minister Tony Blair — who originally proposed the concept — as a possible member.

The Trump administration's 20-point proposal, agreed with Israel and regional partners last month, envisions the Board of Peace steering post-war Gaza toward political stability, reconstruction and statehood. It also authorizes the ISF to use "all necessary measures" — UN language that permits the use of military force — to secure border areas, support vetted Palestinian police units, and ensure the flow of humanitarian assistance.

As the stabilisation force expands control and restores order, Israeli forces will withdraw from Gaza "based on standards, milestones and timeframes linked to demilitarization," according to the resolution. These benchmarks must be jointly agreed by the ISF, Israel, the United States and the guarantors of the ceasefire.

Pakistan, which voted in favour of the resolution, urged the international community to ensure that the measures outlined in the plan translate into tangible progress toward Palestinian statehood.

Speaking at the Council, Pakistan's Permanent Representative, Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, said the world must support a "credible and time-bound process" toward establishing a viable Palestinian state and insisted there must be "no annexation and no forced displacement." He stressed that territorial contiguity between the West Bank and Gaza remained essential.

UN Secretary General Ant nio Guterres welcomed the Council's decision, calling it "an important step in the consolidation of the ceasefire." In a separate statement, he urged all parties to move "towards the second phase of the US plan," which aims to launch a political process for achieving a two-state solution.

He said the United Nations was committed to fulfilling the responsibilities assigned to it under the resolution, including scaling up humanitarian operations to meet Gaza's immense civilian needs.

Despite not blocking the measure, both Moscow and Beijing raised pointed objections.

Russia's UN envoy, Vassily Nebenzia, said "key components" related to legal questions had been overlooked and warned that the ISF seemed empowered to act "absolutely autonomously, without any regard for the position or opinion of Ramallah." He argued the resolution evoked "colonial practices" reminiscent of the British Mandate period, where Palestinian views were sidelined.

China's envoy, Fu Cong, said the text was "lacking in many respects and deeply worrisome." He criticised the governance arrangements outlined for post-war Gaza, saying "Palestine is barely visible in it" and that Palestinian sovereignty and ownership were "not fully reflected."

Although Israel hailed Donald Trump's Gaza peace plan after its endorsement by the UN Security Council, Hamas rejected the resolution because it fails to respect the "demands and rights" of the Palestinians.

"This resolution does not meet the level of our Palestinian people's political and humanitarian demands and rights," the group said in a statement.

The statement also decried the establishment of an international force whose "mission includes the disarmament" of Palestinian groups in Gaza.

"The resolution imposes an international trusteeship on the Gaza Strip, which our people, its forces, and its constituent groups reject," the group said.

Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu's office hailed Trump's plan on Tuesday, saying it would lead to "peace and prosperity because it insists upon full demilitarisation, disarmament and the deradicalisation of Gaza".

On X, Netanyahu's office said the plan would also lead to an expansion of the Abraham Accords.